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ABSTRACT

A study was done of Californians' attitudes toward public higher education and its future in comparison to attitudes across the nation. The study conducted eight focus groups in California and used those findings to generate hypotheses tested through two telephone surveys. A California survey was conducted with 832 residents 18 years of age or older. A national survey was conducted with 502 residents of the continental United States 18 years old or over. The survey found that Californians view a college degree as key to employment and economic security and yet difficult to attain. The study also found that Californians: (1) are likely to think that educational opportunity is currently available but they are pessimistic about the future of higher education; (2) blame state government for higher education's troubles; (3) want a system that provides opportunity to every qualified person, and value personal responsibility and reciprocity as 68 percent think that unless students have some personal responsibility for paying the cost they will not appreciate its value; (4) are opposed to ideas that would restrict opportunity (cutting enrollments or raising fees) for education but are more likely to consider changes in how education is delivered, and (5) overwhelmingly support providing students with an opportunity to work for their financial aid. Contains appendixes on national attitudes and study methodology. (JB)



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# THE CLOSING GATEWAY

## A REPORT FROM

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# THE CLOSING GATEWAY:
# Californians Consider Their Higher Education System

by John Immerwahr
with Steve Farkas

A Report by the Public Agenda Foundation
for the California Higher Education Policy Center

September 1993

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# Foreword

The California Higher Education Policy Center recently commissioned the Public Agenda Foundation of New York to conduct a series of focus groups and public opinion surveys on national and state attitudes toward higher education. *The Closing Gateway* reports on the results.

The Center is committed to stimulating public awareness, concern and involvement in issues affecting the future of California higher education. Ultimately, higher education in California will be as available and as effective as the public expects, demands, and supports. Therefore, the Center was particularly interested in assessing public concern about higher education and in understanding what value the public places on the accessibility of higher education. This report offers important insights into these and other public perceptions of higher education.

*The Closing Gateway* contains a particularly powerful message about the importance of access to higher education for Californians. State and higher education policy makers who have advocated, supported, or acquiesced in rolling back opportunity and sharply raising prices as responses to state financial problems are clearly out of synch with public preferences. And the public appears to be open to rearrangement of priorities and significant innovation to keep the doors of opportunity open. There appears to be a classic mismatch between the recent choices of leaders and the wishes of voters and taxpayers as of the summer of 1993.

The Center was fortunate to enlist the Public Agenda Foundation in this effort. The authors are John Immerwahr, senior research fellow of the Public Agenda Foundation and department chair of philosophy at Villanova University, and Steve Farkas, senior research associate at the Public Agenda Foundation. Deborah Wadsworth, executive director of the Public Agenda Foundation, played a central role in all aspects of the organization, coordination, and design of the project. The Center and the Public Agenda Foundation were assisted in this work by an advisory committee consisting of Virginia Smith, Arturo Madrid, and Joanne Hurley. Joni Finney was project director at the California Higher Education Policy Center.

The Center welcomes the reactions of readers to our reports.

Patrick M. Callan
Executive Director

# Executive Summary

When Californians think about the state's higher education system, they immediately find themselves with two opposing concerns. On the one hand, they are convinced that a college education is, more than ever before, a key to a good job and to a secure economic life. Three out of four Californians (76 percent) agree that even in today's tough economic climate, a young person who goes to college has better economic prospects than one who takes a job right out of high school. Because a college education is such a critical gateway to a good job and a good future, the vast majority of Californians (84 percent) believe that no qualified and motivated student should be barred from attending college because of cost. Findings from this study suggest that a college degree has increasingly taken on the status of a high school degree in the past: the basic entry ticket to life in the American mainstream.

At the same time that Californians are convinced of the necessity of a college degree, they are also becoming much more worried about the attainability of college education. Fifty-two percent think that many qualified people are currently unable to get a college education in California, 67 percent feel that opportunity for higher education has decreased in the last ten years, and an even higher number (73 percent) believe that getting a college education will become even more difficult in the future. Most Californians are convinced that declining educational opportunity is hitting hardest at those who can least afford it—students from low income families. As a result, Californians are deeply concerned about higher education: 53 percent report a high level of concern, even in comparison to top-drawer issues such as the economy. Nearly two-thirds say they would support a fundamental overhaul of the state's higher education system.

Compared to the nation as a whole, Californians are more likely to think that educational opportunity is currently available, but they are much more pessimistic than other Americans about the future of higher education. They are also more likely to think that their state's educational system should be substantially overhauled, with 64 percent of Californians calling for basic changes versus 54 percent nationwide.

When it comes to assigning blame, Californians point first to state government. Sixty-three percent see cutbacks in state funds as a very important factor in the troubles faced by higher education, and almost the same number (61 percent) point specifically to state mismanagement. Direct educational costs, such as professors' salaries, equipment and buildings, are less likely to be cited as very important factors.

Certain basic values seem to drive the public's attitudes about solutions. Californians want a system that provides *opportunity* to every qualified person (84 percent support this fundamental value). Californians also value *personal responsibility and reciprocity*, the sense that people should give something back for what they receive. Sixty-eight percent, for example, think that unless students have some personal responsibility for paying for the cost of education they will not appreciate its value. An overwhelming majority (70 percent compared to 18 percent) is convinced that *individual motivation* is more important for a good education than the quality of a college.

These values explain the way Californians think about proposed-solutions. They are opposed to ideas which restrict opportunity to education (such as cutting enrollments or raising fees) but they are more likely to consider changes in how education is delivered (including less research, less money spent on buildings, and higher student-faculty ratios). Presumably, Californians feel that a motivated student can compensate for bigger classes, but can't get any education if he or she is excluded from college attendance. Similarly, the public gives the greatest support to financial aid structures that maximize the values of reciprocity. Providing students with an opportunity to work for their financial aid has overwhelming support. Other approaches, such as loans, direct aid to colleges, and grants to students are somewhat less popular.

# Introduction

When people are asked to name the issues that concern them most, they typically mention either major national issues, such as the economy, unemployment, or health care, or more dramatic, emotionally charged problems like AIDS, crime, or terrorism. For most people, higher education is an issue of somewhat lesser national importance. In their personal lives, however, the question of how to provide a college education for their children takes on a larger significance. In our survey of 832 California residents, and in a series of eight focus groups conducted in different parts of the state, we found high levels of concern about higher education and its role in California's future.

## Public Anxiety

It is tempting to think that concerns about higher education are merely an extension of the public's general displeasure with public education. This study suggests, however, that Californians' concerns about higher education are radically different from the usual complaints expressed about elementary and secondary (K-12) education.

What most concerns people about K-12 schooling is its *quality*. In many of the focus groups conducted for this study, we began by asking people to say the first thing that came to mind when they thought of primary and secondary schools. Invariably, the first associations were lack of discipline, teachers who don't teach, students who won't learn, and an environment plagued by crime and drugs.

Californians' concerns about higher education are quite different. What people typically mention first is not the *quality* of public higher education, but its *cost and inaccessibility*. As one woman in Bakersfield said, "I don't know how I am going to be able to afford to send my daughter. I will have to work two or three jobs. She already works and goes to high school now, and it's hard on her. I don't know how we will manage." Compared to the way they feel about primary and secondary education, Californians seem to be relatively sanguine about the quality of higher education.

**People feel that a college education is increasingly important for young people. The vast majority of Californians believe that for a young person today, a college education is the gateway to a middle-class life.**

The source of public anxiety is a collision between two deeply held concerns. On the one hand, people feel that a college education is increasingly important for young people. The vast majority of Californians believe that for a young person today, a college education is the gateway to a middle-class life. At the same time Californians see opportunity for higher education slipping out of their grasp. Their fear is that the costs of sending a young person to college will soon be so high that only the well-off will be able to afford it.

This fear is further heightened by a sense of loss. In the past, Californians could take comfort from the fact that one of the world's finest higher education systems was virtually free to any California resident. Today, California's youthful and diverse population seems to sense that a door that used to be wide open is being slowly closed to them.

Not surprisingly, people are deeply concerned about the problem as they see it develop. While they don't know exactly what to do about it, they feel that the situation cannot be allowed to continue. A substantial majority of Californians, as we shall see, believe that the state's public higher education system needs to be fundamentally overhauled to keep higher education available to any qualified and motivated student.

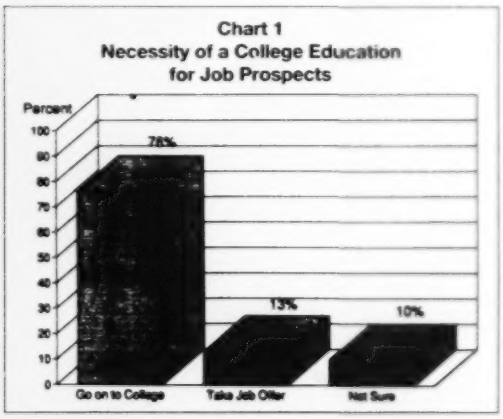
As it turns out, one useful way to understand attitudes toward higher education is to compare them to the way people feel about health care, rather than comparing them to attitudes about elementary and secondary education. Although concerns about higher education may be less intense than concerns about health care, the dynamics of the two issues are similar. In both cases, we find that Californians feel at least some satisfaction with the quality of the institutions (much higher in the case of health care), but grave concerns about access. What concerns people about health care is that rising costs may push health care out of reach for themselves and their families. Although people don't know what they want done about the situation, they call for basic (but as yet nonspecific) changes in the health care system. In the minds of many Californians, higher education raises the same problem—a critically important good is perceived as spiralling out of reach, and they want the problem addressed.

In the first two sections of this report, we explore both sides of this equation—Californians' increasing conviction that higher education is an essential need in contemporary society and their escalating concern about access. In sections three and four, we describe reactions to various proposals for change and the deep-seated values underlying people's views. In Appendix One, we compare Californians' attitudes and concerns about higher education with those of other Americans. And in Appendix Two, we describe our research methodology.

SECTION ONE

# Why is Higher Education So Important to Californians?

There is no mystery about *why* higher education is such an important value for so many people. Americans have traditionally believed that a good job is an essential element for obtaining a satisfying lifestyle, and for most Californians, a higher education is the prerequisite to a good job. By an overwhelming majority of nearly six to one (76 percent to 13 percent) Californians endorse the view that "high school graduates should go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects" and reject the view that "high school graduates should take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already."




*Q: "Which statement comes closer to your own view? High school graduates should go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects, or high school graduates should take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already."*

Reflecting on his own experiences as an immigrant to this country, James Harvey, chief staff writer of *A Nation at Risk*, explains the significance of a college degree this way: "When I came to this country 30 years ago, my uncle, who was already established here said, 'If you want to be someone in America, you need to graduate high school.' Today, he would say the same thing about a college degree." For many Californians, a college degree has taken on the status traditionally held by a high school diploma.

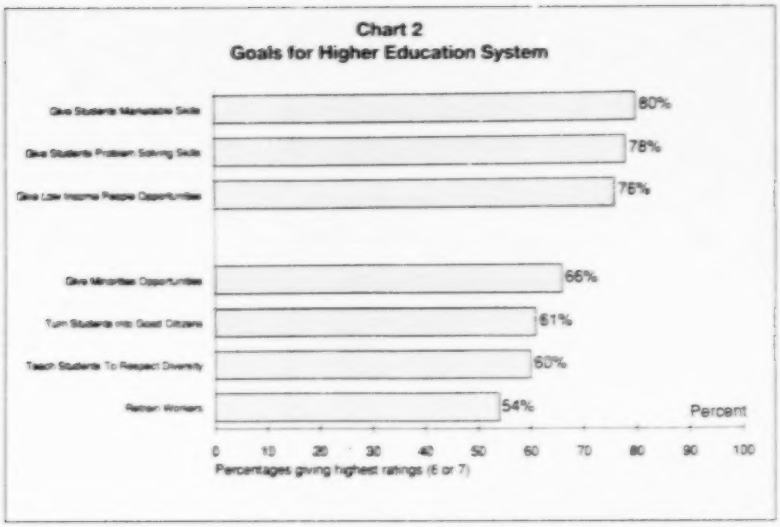
In focus groups across the state, people emphasized that a college degree is a necessary requirement for almost any good job:

> *You have to have it to get a job. The more education the more you have a chance to get a job.*
>
> —in San Jose

> *It is important to go to college, because you can get a better job. If you look in the paper, most of the jobs say that you need a degree.*
>
> —in Hayward

The same picture emerged when Californians were asked to rank their expectations about a college education. Three things top the list of most important goals. Californians believe a college education should provide marketable skills, teach problem-solving skills for a variety of careers, and give low-income people an opportunity to succeed. Other goals—helping minorities succeed, retraining people in the workforce, teaching students citizenship, and promoting respect for diversity—also commanded support, but at significantly lower levels.

For most Californians, access to an affordable higher education is regarded virtually as a right, at least for students who are qualified.




*"Different people expect a college education to accomplish different goals. ... Please tell me the extent to which you think each of [the following goals] is important. Use a scale from 1 to 7, in which 1 means you think the goal not at all important and 7 means you think the goal is extremely important."*

*Q: "Giving students marketable skills so they can get good jobs when they graduate."*

*Q: "Giving students problem solving skills so they can be ready for a variety of careers."*

*Q: "Giving people from low income backgrounds opportunities to succeed."*

*Q: "Retraining people who have already been in the work force for new jobs."*

*Q: "Giving minorities such as blacks and Latinos opportunities to succeed."*

*Q: "Exposing students to other cultures and teaching them to respect diversity."*

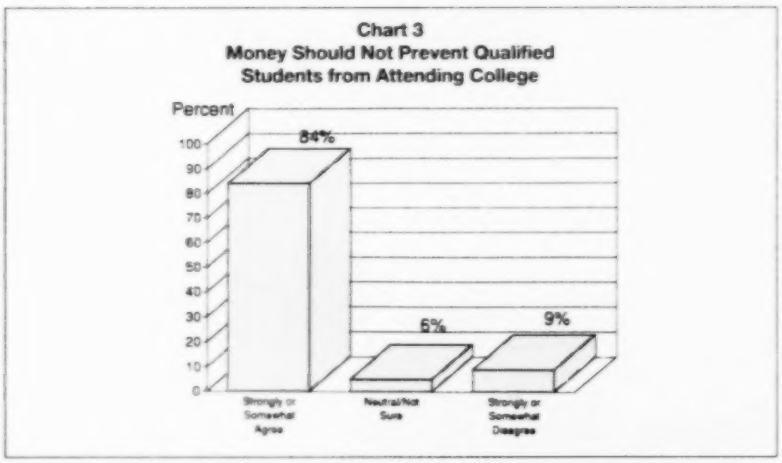
*Q: "Helping to turn students into good citizens."*

to college, but it is hard to go, and the price is skyrocketing."

This is one area where the parallel with health care is particularly close. Most Americans are very uncomfortable with the idea that people should not get the health care they need just because of income; they seem to be equally uncomfortable with the idea that low income should prevent a qualified student from getting a college education.

Support for the importance of higher education transcends ideological and demographic categories. It is widely endorsed by Republicans, Democrats, and independents, and by people from various income levels and ethnic groups. California is a large and diverse state

As we point out later, this does not mean that people think higher education should be free. They believe strongly, however, that financial concerns alone should not put higher education out of reach for someone who can benefit from it. There is virtual unanimity (84 percent) on the proposition that "we should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so." In focus groups, many people echoed the thoughts of a Hayward man who said, "I think everyone should have an opportunity to go




*Q: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: We should not allow the price of college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so. Would you say you agree strongly, agree somewhat, neither agree nor disagree, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly?"*



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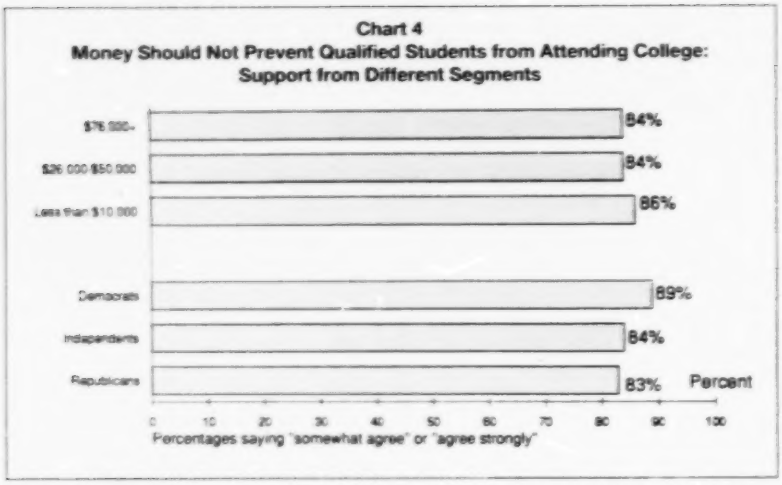



*Q: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? We should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so."*

and, as one might expect, we did find some topics which were controversial (see sidebar: FOCUS ON OLDER PEOPLE, p. 15). On the most basic questions about higher education, however, the consensus is much more striking than the differences.

**A College Degree vs. a College Education**

Although Californians are nearly unanimous about the necessity of a college *degree*, there is much more controversy about the importance of a college *education*. Most people seem to be convinced that young people who do not have college credentials will be locked out of good jobs, but they are not nearly so convinced that there is something intrinsically valuable about college education itself. For many Californians, the demand for a degree by potential employers is often a kind of credentialism. But the fact that the degree may only be a piece of paper does not, for most people, make it any less important in today's harsh economic climate.

Many Californians seem to feel that, especially in times of high unemployment, employers often demand a college degree, not because it is essential for the job, but as a way to limit the number of applicants. Nearly two-thirds of Californians (62 percent) think it is a problem that "too many employers hire college graduates for jobs that could be done as well or better by people without a college degree."

There is also a widespread sense that not everyone can profit from a college education and that many young people are pressured into going to college by peers, parents, or society. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) think that it is a problem that "many people are just wasting their time and money in college because they don't know what else to do with their lives." Fifty-five percent say they are concerned that "society has made going to college seem more important than it is."

In focus groups, people talked about trade schools and apprenticeship programs and seemed genuinely concerned by the perception that college was increasingly becoming the *only* path to a decent job. Nearly 55 percent expressed a concern that "too many people are going to college instead of to alternatives to college, where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair." Concerns about the intrinsic value of a college education were often connected to pessimism about California's economy. In an economy where many people with college degrees are unemployed or taking jobs which used to be held by high school graduates, there is a great deal of gloom about opportunities generally, and a certain amount of cynicism about higher education.

In focus groups, Californians who did not themselves have a college education were especially skeptical about the intrinsic value of higher education and about college courses that are not directly job-related. As one San Jose woman said: "If I am going to be an

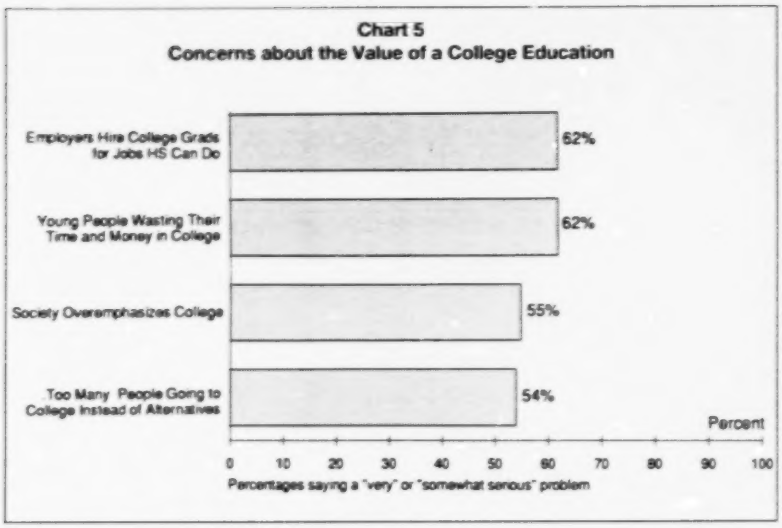


Chart 5
Concerns about the Value of a College Education
Employers Hire College Grads for Jobs HS Can Do
62%
Young People Wasting Their Time and Money in College
62%
Society Overemphasizes College
55%
Too Many People Going to College Instead of Alternatives
54%
Percent
0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Percentages saying a "very" or "somewhat serious" problem

*"I am going to read you several concerns about California's public college system which some people have talked about. For each one, please tell me whether you think it is a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, a not very serious problem or not a serious problem at all."*

*Q: "Too many people are going to college instead of to alternatives to college where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair."*

*Q: "Society has made going to college seem more important than it really is."*

*Q: "Many young people are just wasting their time and money in college because they don't know what else to do with their lives."*

*Q: "A lot of employers hire college graduates for jobs that could be done as well or better by people without a college degree."*

accountant, what do I care what someone did back in ancient Egypt? It is ridiculous to study that stuff." We also heard bitter complaints, especially from non-college educated respondents, about young college graduates who supervise older experienced workers without a degree. A woman from Bakersfield said: "My husband's boss is 24 years old. He is a kid; he still has a baby face. He has no idea what is going on, but he is the boss. They hired him because he has a degree, and it impresses the bigwigs because they have the same education."

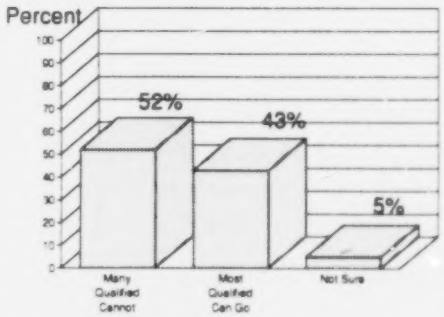
Concerns about credentialism, however, do not affect the strong conviction that, without a college education, a young person is severely hampered. Indeed, the fact that a college degree may only be a piece of paper *increases* the public's anxiety. It is as though society is telling them: "Your child might be a real asset to a company, but without a college degree he or she won't even be considered for a position."

**SECTION TWO**

# Concerns About Access

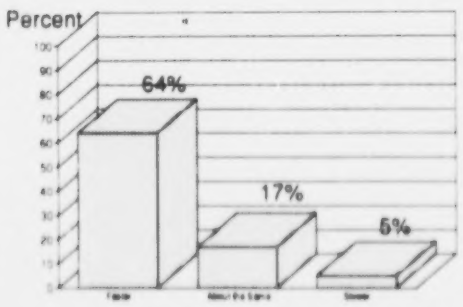
The growing sense that a college degree is essential to a comfortable, secure, middle-class life is accompanied by a widely shared perception that college education is becoming less accessible. Two-thirds of California residents (64 percent) think that higher education prices are going up faster than other things in California. As a result, a majority (52 percent) think there are many qualified people who currently do not have the opportunity to go to college in California. There is also a widespread concern that even those who are going to college cannot get the classes they need. Eighty-three percent of Californians rate "students having trouble getting the classes they need in order to graduate" as a very serious or somewhat serious problem. As one San Diego woman said, "At San Diego State, my daughter can't get the classes she needs; she could only get three of them. She may have to go to private school. I can understand that California has budget problems, but the students are caught in the middle of it."

**Opportunity for Higher Education**



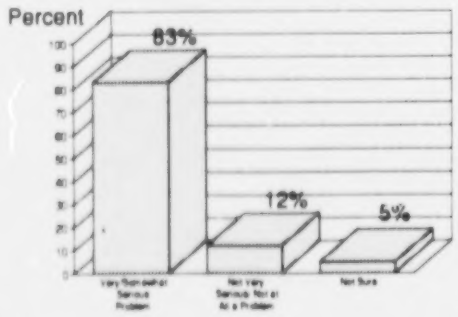

*Q: "Do you believe that currently in California the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?"*

**Chart 6**
**Rate of Inflation in College Prices**



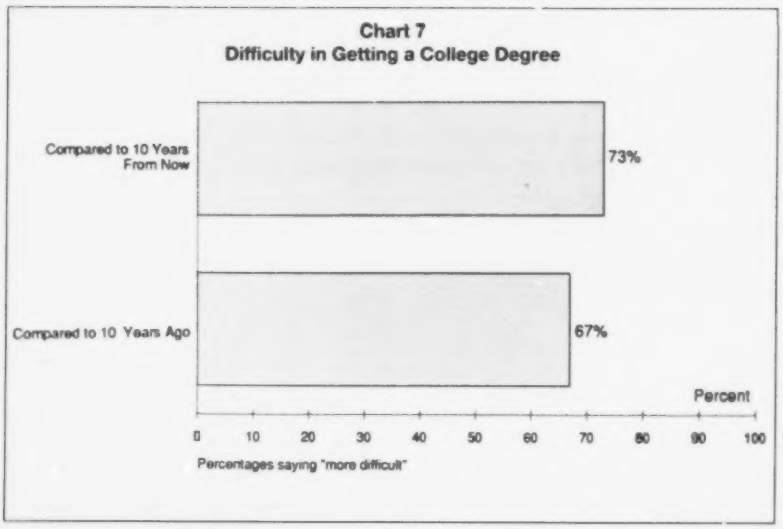

*Q: "Compared to other things in California, are college prices going up at a faster rate, are college prices going up at a slower rate, or are they going up at about the same rate?"*

**Problems Getting Classes Needed for Graduation**




*Q: "Please tell me whether you think [this] is a serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, a not very serious problem or not a serious problem at all. Students have trouble getting the classes they need in order to graduate."*

Californians also believe that the situation has deteriorated and that it will continue to worsen in the future. Sixty-seven percent think that it is more difficult to get a college education now than it was ten years ago, and an even higher percentage (73 percent) feel that college will be even more inaccessible in the future. Once again, these views are shared by substantial majorities of all seg-




*Q: "And do you think getting a college education will be more difficult or less difficult, or about the same, 10 years from now?"*

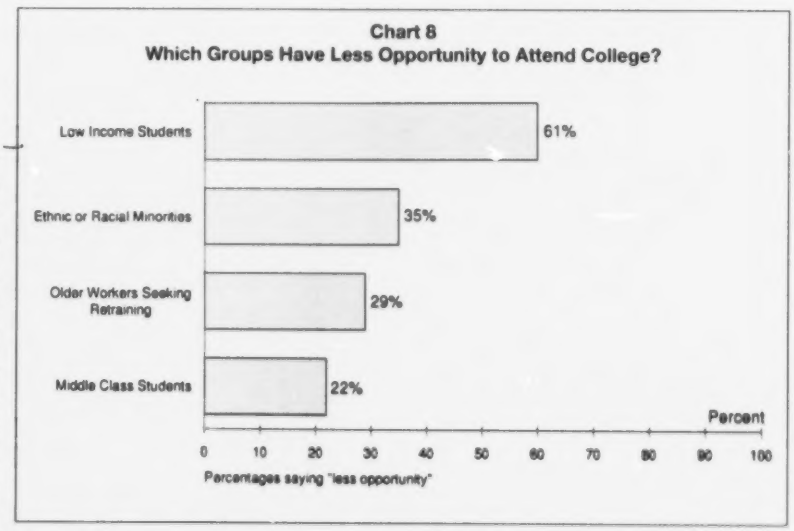
*Q: "In your view, has getting a college education become more difficult than it was 10 years ago, less difficult than it was 10 years ago, or is it about as difficult as it was 10 years ago?"*

ments of the population. As one San Diego man said: "I see the costs escalating higher and higher. You hear on the news that the fees have gone up 80 percent, but it will go even higher still."

## Those Most Vulnerable Are Hardest Hit

Californians might be somewhat less concerned about increasing costs if they felt that higher costs would weed out students who really don't belong in college anyway. But most Californians are convinced that cutbacks hit hardest at precisely those who most need a college education. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) agree that raising college fees will put college out of reach for many people who should be going to college. Only a minority (27 percent) think that the cuts will mostly discourage people "who are not committed to going to college in the first place."

Californians also overwhelmingly agree that low-income families have the most difficult time getting a college education. Although "giving people from low-income backgrounds opportunities to succeed" was rated as one of the most important goals for higher education, qualified students from low income families are thought to have the least opportunity to attend college. While middle-class people sometimes complain that




*Q: "Do you think qualified students from low income families – regardless of ethnic background – have less opportunity, more opportunity or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?"*

*Q: "How about qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities such as blacks or Latinos?"*

*Q: "How about people who are older and are going back to school for retraining?"*

*Q: "How about qualified students from middle-class families – regardless of their ethnic background?"*

they are "too rich for scholarships but too poor to afford college," they too, along with minority group members, identify low-income families as hardest hit by rising college costs. As one person in L.A. said, "the biggest problem is the elitist problem—the separation of the poor and the wealthy. Poor people will have a hard time getting an education, and that will leave everything in the hands of the wealthy."

As a result of these perceptions, Californians are deeply troubled by the situation in higher education. Indeed, when specifically asked about higher education, 53 percent report a high level of concern, even in comparison to other issues such as the economy and health care. Obviously, this finding cannot be taken literally; higher education is not an issue of the same magnitude as the economy or health care (most surveys currently show these issues as the top national concerns). But this study does suggest that when people specifically focus on higher education, they are deeply troubled by it.

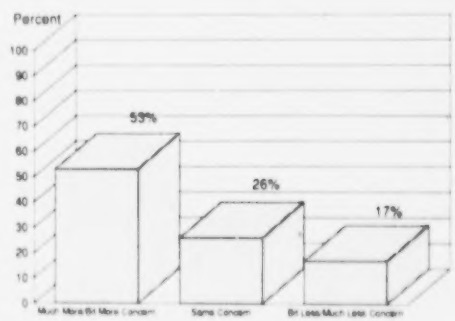
What is even more striking is the high percentage of Californians who believe that there should be drastic changes in the way the state's higher education system is organized. By a more than two-to-one margin (64 percent to 28 percent), Californians believe that the state's "public college and university system should be basically overhauled."

Calls for a basic overhaul of higher education in California do not appear to be driven primarily by concern about quality. Given the pessimistic picture that focus group respondents painted of California generally and, specifically, of K-12 schooling, Californians give the quality of higher education a qualified vote of confidence. Fifty-five percent think that the quality of public higher education is the same or better than it was ten years ago, and a plurality of 46 percent to 37 percent think that the public colleges and universities are teaching students the "important things they need to know."

Our interpretation is that what unsettles people is precisely the dual problem of the increasing importance of a higher education and the diminishing opportunity to get one. People may not have a clear idea about spe-

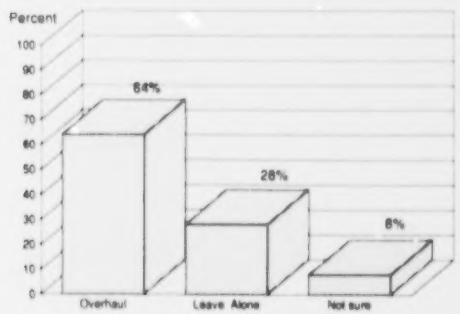
**Chart 9**

**Level of Concern**




*Q: "Compared with other issues facing California such as the economy and health care, how concerned are you about California's public colleges and universities? Would you say that you are much more concerned, a bit more concerned, have the same level of concern, a bit less concerned, or much less concerned?"*

**Support for Fundamental Overhaul**




*Q: "Some people think that California's public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled. Other people think that California's college system should be basically left alone. Which of those views comes closer to your own?"*

## Focus on Latinos

The attitudes of California's Latino population differ from the population at large in a number of ways. Perhaps the biggest difference concerns the most desirable goals of a college education. For Latinos, the single most important goal is "giving minorities such as blacks and Latinos opportunities to succeed." Seventy-three percent of Latinos describe this goal as "extremely important" as compared to only 43 percent of the non-Latino population. Latinos are also more likely to describe a college education as necessary for almost everyone. This view is held by 75 percent of California Latinos as compared to only a narrow majority (51 percent) of non-Latinos. California's Latino population, then, is even more likely to see higher education as an essential path to opportunity and success.

The centrality of this goal for Latinos may explain other differences between Latinos and the rest of the population. Latinos are particularly concerned about access to higher education as it exists currently. Over two-thirds (68 percent) of Latinos believe that many qualified people currently do not have an opportunity to attend college, as compared to only 48 percent of non-Latinos. And Latinos are more likely to think that the price of a college education is higher in California than in other states (49 percent of Latinos believe this as compared to 30 percent of the rest of the population).

Latinos are also more likely to look to government for support in obtaining this important goal. By margins of more than two to one (61 percent compared to 26 percent), Latinos support the idea that government should support needy students through grants and loans (even if other programs have to be cut), rather than requiring the students to make sacrifices and work part-time. The rest of the population is more evenly divided on this question, with 47 percent supporting grants and loans and 44 percent calling for more sacrifice. Similarly, the Latino population is more supportive of state financial aid to students and more supportive of direct aid to colleges. (To insure that Latino attitudes were accurately measured, respondents were given a choice about whether to do the interview in English or Spanish. Five percent of the interviews were conducted in Spanish.)

cific solutions, but they are frustrated by a situation that seems to be difficult now and getting worse every day. As one Bakersfield man put it, the situation in higher education "just can't keep going on this way." People want an "overhaul" that will keep the doors of the state's higher universities open to those who are qualified and motivated.

As suggested earlier, this is one way in which attitudes toward higher education resemble attitudes about health care. National surveys show that most people (74 percent in one recent survey) are satisfied with the quality of the health care they receive (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, 1993), but at the same time, a very large majority (85 percent) call for a complete overhaul or major changes in the health care system (Martilla and Kiley Inc./Harvard School of Public Health, 1993). What alarms people about health care, in other words, is not lack of quality, but fears that escalating costs may cause them to lose their health insurance. Calls for an overhaul of the health care system do not necessarily translate into support for any particular approach. Instead, they register a general concern that the situation is becoming increasingly intolerable.

## Matrix 1: Health Care and Higher Education

| | Health Care (from national surveys) | Higher Education (for California only) |
|---|---|---|
| **Money should not be an obstacle** | 91% think that "everybody should have the right to get the best possible health care—as good as the treatment a millionaire gets." * | 84% believe we should not allow the price of a college education to prevent students who are qualified and motivated from going to college. |
| **Costs are rising faster than inflation** | 64% think that health care costs are rising "much faster" than the overall rate of inflation. ** | 64% think college prices are going up at a faster rate. |
| **Basic satisfaction with quality** | 74% say they are satisfied with the quality of care available to themselves and their families. *** | 55% think quality of education is the same or better than ten years ago, although only a plurality (47 percent) think colleges are teaching important things students need to know. |
| **Concerns about access** | 59% worry that they might lose health insurance if they lose or change jobs.**** | 73% think getting a college education will be more difficult in the future. |
| **Waste fraud and abuse: a big part of the problem** | 67% think greed and profits in the health care system are a major reason for escalating costs. **** | 61% think state mismanagement is a major factor in escalating fees for public colleges and universities. |
| **Support for basic changes in system** | 85% want complete overhaul or major changes in health care system. **** | 64% want fundamental overhaul. |

* Louis Harris & Associates, 1987.
** Public Agenda/EBRI, 1991.
*** NBC News/*Wall Street Journal*, 1993.
**** Martilla and Kiley/ Harvard School of Public Health, 1993.

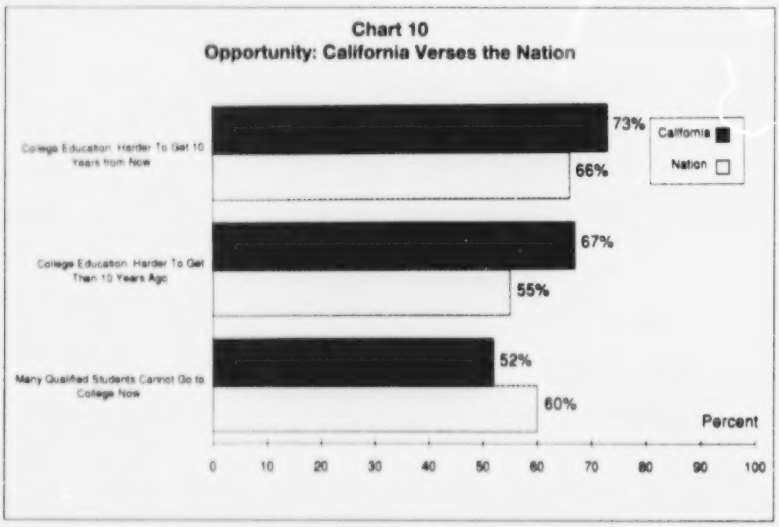
### A National Comparison: Californians More Concerned about Access

To put the attitudes of Californians in perspective, this study included a parallel study of 500 Americans nationwide (see Appendix One: National attitudes toward higher education). On general questions about higher education, the attitudes of Californians are indistinguishable from Americans nationwide, but there were significant differences on specific questions about educational opportunity.

The survey asked respondents from both groups to evaluate existing educational opportunities in the states where they live. Fifty-two percent of Californians believe that there are many qualified people in California who do not have the opportunity to attend

college. This is a high number, but the national figures are even higher. Nationwide, six out of ten (60 percent) say that many qualified people in their state do not have an opportunity to attend college. By this measure, Californians are somewhat more likely to feel that their *present* system provides educational opportunities.

When the survey moved from concerns about the current situation to concerns about the future, we see that Californians are more likely to think that opportunity has decreased and are considerably more pessimistic about the future than other Americans. Sixty-seven percent of Californians say that it is harder to get a college degree now than it was ten years ago, compared to 55 percent nationwide. Seventy-three percent of Californians think it will be even more difficult ten years from now, compared to 66 percent nationwide.

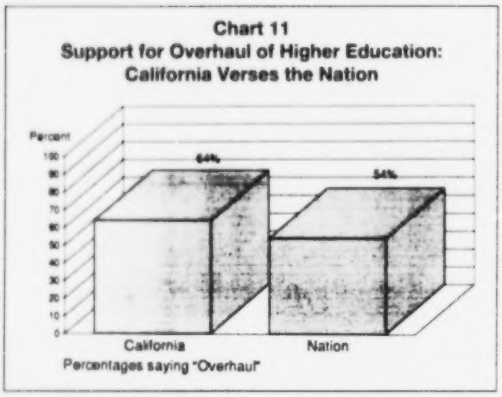



*Q: "Do you believe that currently in California [respondents' state] the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?"*

*Q: "In your view, has getting a college education become more difficult than it was 10 years ago, less difficult than it was 10 years ago, or is it about as difficult as it was 10 years ago?"*

*Q: "And do you think getting a college education will be more difficult or less difficult, or about the same, 10 years from now?"*

Californians are also less satisfied with the quality of education they are receiving now. Nationwide, 54 percent think that state colleges and universities are teaching students




*Q: "Some people think that California's [respondents' state] public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled. Other people think that California's [respondents' state] college system should be basically left alone. Which of those views comes closer to your own?"*

the important things they need to know, compared to a smaller number (46 percent) who feel this way in California.

Not surprisingly, then, Californians are more concerned about higher education than are residents of other states. Nationwide, 41 percent reported a high level of concern about higher education. This is a high figure by any measure (since the comparison was with health care and the economy) but it is significantly lower than the figure in California, where 53 percent expressed a high level of concern. Californians are also more likely to want fundamental reforms in higher education, with 64 percent calling for a basic overhaul as compared to 54 percent nationwide.

These differences may be partially explained by looking at California's history in

higher education. Traditionally, Californians have had much greater opportunity for higher education than those in many other states. Indeed, Californians are still more likely than other Americans to give their own state satisfactory marks on opportunity. The majority of Americans—in California and everywhere else—are sold on the importance of a college degree, but Californians are more likely to see access as something they are losing, rather than as something they never had. As one computer programmer in Los Angeles said, "The university system was the jewel of California. It is no longer and it's sad. We saw the tail end of a good thing, and it is gone now."

SECTION THREE

# What Has Gone Wrong?

## Targeting State Government

Californians share a widely held perception about who bears the primary responsibility for problems in higher education. In the eyes of most Californians, state government deserves the lion's share of the blame.

When asked *why* they think college fees and expenses are going up, Californians express some concern about overpaid professors and lavish expenses on buildings and grounds, but most of their attention is focused on problems at the state level. By large majorities, people name state cutbacks (63 percent) and state mismanagement (61 percent) as very important reasons for increases in college costs. By contrast, less than half (46 percent) feel overpaid administrators are an important part of the problem. Thirty-eight percent cite general inflation; 24 percent target buildings, grounds and unnecessary equipment. Only 22 percent name overpaid professors as a major reason.

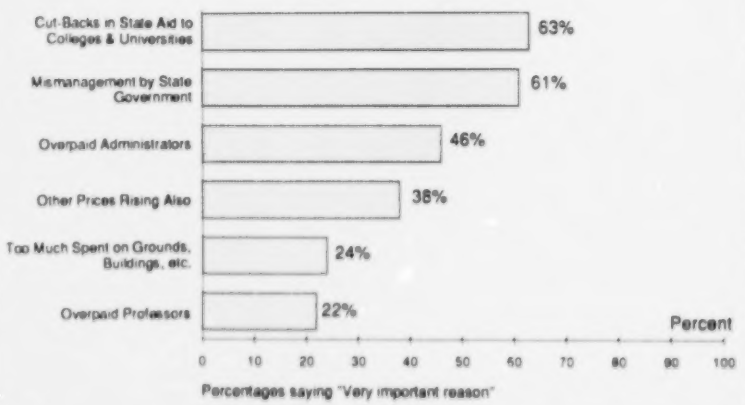
Focus groups suggest that two factors are at work here. First, higher education in California is closely associated with state government, and there seems to be a great deal of anger and frustration about what is going on in state government in California. Focus group respondents tended to move quickly from concerns about higher education to considerable hostility toward state government. Many comments were very pointed:

*We always have only two choices about education—raise our taxes or have the kids pay for it themselves. Why isn't there another choice? Pay for education out of the taxes you are already taking from me. Why is it [that they] always want to take it from me? I am already at poverty level. Do you want me to get a Folger's can and stand on the corner?*

—in San Diego

*I look at it at the state level. It is mismanagement of state funds, and it has been happening for a long time. Like the lottery—*

**Chart 12**
**Reasons for Rising College Prices**




*Q: "I am going to read you some reasons that some people have given for why college prices are going up. For each reason, please tell me if you think it is a very important, a somewhat important, a not very important, or not an important reason at all." [Items in this battery were rotated with each new respondent.]*

*Q: "Mismanagement by the state government."*

*Q: "Prices are going up for everything else, so college prices go up as a result."*

*Q: "Too much money is spent on the grounds, buildings and unnecessary equipment."*

*Q: "Cutbacks in state aid to public colleges and universities."*

*Q: "Overpaid professors."*

*at first, school employees got the money the first year; then we don't see it anymore.*

—in Hayward

*They know that education is important, so they keep bringing up education as a reason for raising our taxes. It is an excuse to raise our taxes. The money that was there to spend on education is there, but they are using it for other things.*

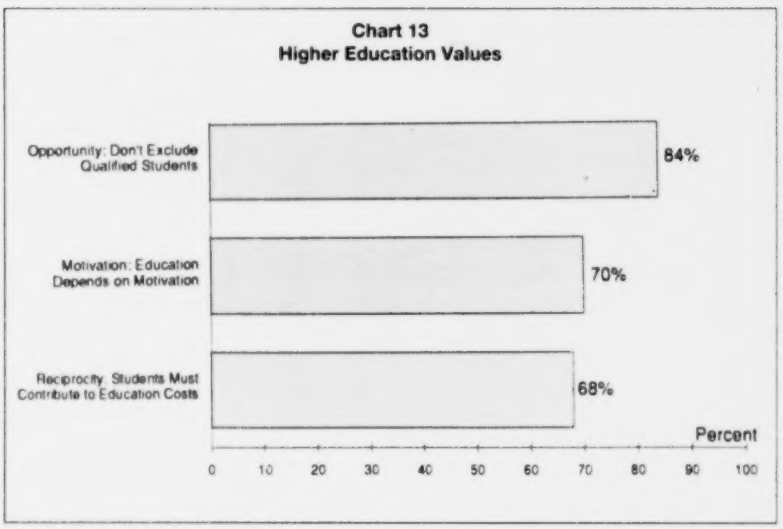
—in San Diego

Compared to the nation as a whole, Californians were slightly more likely to fault overpaid administrators (46 percent to 41 percent) and slightly less likely to mention overpaid professors (22 percent versus 26 percent) as major factors in increasing college expenses.

## SECTION FOUR

# Principles for Evaluating Solutions

Most Californians do not have specific solutions in mind about how to solve the problems in higher education, but they do have certain deeply held values that guide their thinking about higher education. Using a broad range of specific proposals to prompt discussion in focus groups, combined with analysis of the survey results, researchers identified three main values that drive a great deal of public thinking about education:




*Opportunity Q: "Do you believe that currently in California the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?"*

*Motivation Q: "Which of the following two statements comes closer to your own view? The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends upon the quality of the college he or she is attending. The benefit a student gets from attending college mostly depends upon how much of an effort he or she puts in."*

*Reciprocity Q: "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Students don't appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying for what it costs."*

- **Opportunity.** As discussed in earlier sections, an overwhelming majority of Californians think cost should not prevent any qualified and motivated person from receiving a college education.

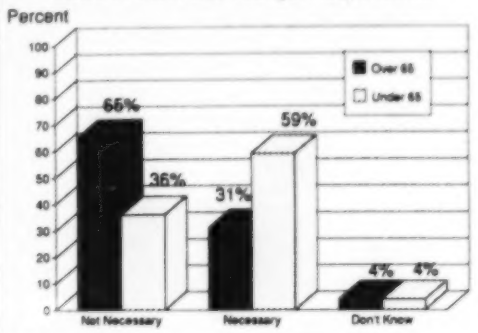
- **Motivation.** People also put great stress on the importance of individual motivation. If a student in primary or secondary school has a bad experience, many people tend to blame the school, parents, or administrators. By contrast, people tend to place the primary responsibility for success in college on the individual student. Seventy percent of Californians believe that the benefit a student gets from college depends mostly on the effort he or she puts into it. Only 18 percent attribute the benefit to the quality of the college.

- **Reciprocity.** People believe that students should demonstrate that they are deserving of higher education, and, in some senses, earn the right to attend college. Opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich, for example, has observed a shift in public conceptions of "deserving" and changing attitudes about rights and responsibilities: Americans are moving away from the notion of entitlements, toward a concept of rights based on reciprocity—giving something back to society in exchange for what we receive. This attitude is important in Californians' thinking about higher education as well. Sixty-eight percent of Californians believe that "students don't appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal

## Focus on Older People

Californians who are over 65 years of age have a somewhat different slant on a number of issues related to higher education. Probably the most dramatic difference concerns the necessity of college education itself. By more than a two-to-one majority (65 percent compared to 31 percent), older Californians believe that a college education is not necessary for many people. Californians under 65 take nearly the opposite view: 59 percent believe that a college education is necessary for everyone, and only 36 percent question this.

**Chart 16**
**Is College Necessary for Everyone: Views of Older and Younger Respondents**




*Q: "Some people think that these days a college education is necessary for almost everyone. Other people think that a college education is not necessary for many people. Which of those views comes closer to your own?"*

Older Californians are also more likely to think that too many people are going to colleges. Forty-two percent of older people think that it is a very serious problem that too many people are going to colleges rather than trade schools. Only 22 percent of the under-65 population feel this way.

Older people also place a much greater emphasis on individual responsibility. They are more likely to feel strongly that students who don't pay for a college education won't appreciate it (59 percent of older people strongly agree with this statement, compared to 43 percent of Californians under 65), and they are much more likely to think that individuals who can't afford college should make sacrifices rather than look to the state for help. A healthy majority (54 percent) of older people would rather see needy young people make sacrifices themselves (such as working part-time and living at home) rather than get state aid that comes from other sources. Once again, the percentages are reversed for the under-65 population, where the majority (52 percent) supports state aid for these students, even at the cost of cutbacks elsewhere.

responsibility for paying for what it costs." As one San Diego woman said, "A giveaway is a throwaway. Someone coming out of high school should learn something about life in terms of investing in their own future."

These primary values underlie people's reactions to various proposed solutions to the problems of increasing costs and decreasing opportunity.

### Restructuring Higher Education

This study presented Californians with a series of solutions that colleges and universities could use to respond to the problem of higher costs and diminishing resources—each accompanied by a possible tradeoff. While none of the suggested ideas is popular, Californians offer varying degrees of resistance depending on the extent to which the solution matches or violates these core values.

Least popular of all of the solutions covered by the study is the suggestion that universities decrease enrollments. Fifty-eight percent of Californians rate this as a poor idea. Californians are almost as hostile to the idea of raising expenses and fees, with 52 percent labeling this as a poor idea. Admitting fewer students and raising fees are unacceptable because these ideas violate the primary value of opportunity. As we have seen, Californians believe that either of these steps will restrict opportunity for many motivated

**Matrix 2: Reaction to ideas for dealing with cutbacks in state aid to colleges and universities.**

| **Proposal** | **Trade-off** (even though some people argue that . . .) | **Resistance Percent** (those saying "poor idea") |
|---|---|---|
| Admit fewer students | there wouldn't be room in the system for some who want to go to college. | 58 percent |
| Raise college prices | the financial burdens on families and students would be too high. | 52 percent |
| Reduce the amount of research | potential scientific discoveries would be delayed or lost. | 38 percent |
| Reduce spending on the upkeep and maintenance of campus buildings and grounds | college campuses would physically deteriorate. | 36 percent |
| Increase the number of students that professors teach | the time professors could spend doing research would go down. | 34 percent |

and qualified students.

There is much less resistance to other proposals that do not directly limit access to higher education, such as limiting research (38 percent label this as a poor idea), cutting back on the upkeep of buildings (36 percent call this a poor idea), or asking professors to teach more students (only 34 percent thought this was a poor idea).

What Californians seem to be saying is that they are least receptive to proposals that reduce or limit access to higher education. Such changes cut sharply against the basic values. But Californians do indicate a willingness to think about changes in the way education is delivered. Here again the basic values come into play. Many people feel that a highly motivated student can still get a good education, even if classes are larger, or buildings are less well kept up.

Even though there is support for research, people are evenly divided on whether a lot of research can be cut, with 45 percent opposing cuts in research and 43 percent supporting them. Generally, Californians support research in concept (in focus groups, people tended to emphasize the value of medical research), but this support is weakened by news coverage of seemingly laughable projects such as studies on insect breeding (spending scarce research dollars to study "how a fly gets horny" seemed to evoke particular contempt).

**Many people seem to believe that the basic values of opportunity and motivation can still be supported by a system that delivers education in a more efficient and cost-effective way.**

Californians may think that state government has caused the higher education crisis, but their demand for a fundamental overhaul

of the system is not restricted to state government. Many are quite willing to consider changes in colleges and universities as well. Many people seem to believe that the basic values of opportunity and motivation can still be supported by a system that delivers education in a more efficient and cost-effective way. Sixty-three percent, for example, agree that colleges "could save money by using new ways of teaching that rely on technological innovations, for example with greater use of computers and tele-conferences so that one professor could teach more students."

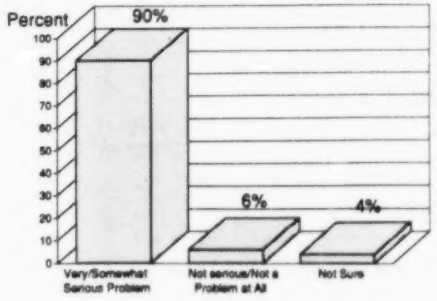
**Paying for Higher Education**

These core values also come into play when people explore different ways to help students pay for higher education. The study presented four different options as a way to explore Californians' values: more opportunities to work for financial aid, more loans, more direct aid to colleges, and more grants.

Significantly, the most popular idea, supported by 82 percent of Californians, is to give students opportunities to work for their own financial aid. This approach appeals to all three primary values: It provides opportunity for education, especially to those who are motivated enough to be willing to work for it. It involves reciprocity and personal responsibility since working one's way through college requires students to put in a kind of "sweat equity" for their education. Several focus group respondents commented favorably on President Clinton's ideas about national service programs, and national surveys show that this idea is very popular with the public.

Loans are a more complex matter in the mind of many Californians. On the one hand, loans are reasonably popular since they do provide an element of reciprocity: students are, in effect, paying for their own education. Fifty-nine percent think that the state should use loans more often than it does now as a way of helping students to pay for college education. Loans are problematic in other ways. There is a widespread and very troubling perception that many students are defaulting on college loans. In the public's mind, defaults have turned education loans from a reciprocity-based program into one more example of people robbing the public till. At the same time, there is also concern about the debt that students can accumulate in paying for higher education costs.

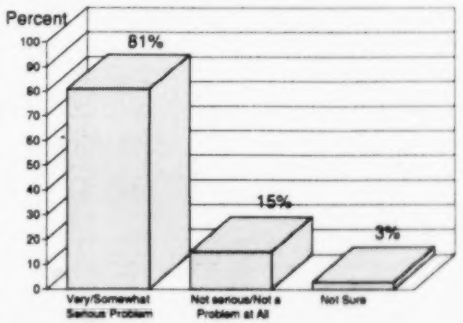
**Chart 14**
**Too Many Students Don't Pay Loans Back**




*"I am going to read you several concerns about California's public college system which some people have talked about. For each one, please tell me whether you think it is a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem or not a serious problem at all."*

*Q: "Too many students take out college loans and never pay them back."*

**Students Borrow Too Much**




*Q: "Students are having to borrow too much money to pay for their college education."*

Direct aid to colleges and universities is supported by most Californians (55 percent think this method should be used more often). However, this idea is also somewhat controversial. On the one hand, most Californians see cutbacks in state aid as a major cause of escalating college costs. On the other hand, many focus group respondents were worried that if the state gives more money to education, the extra funds will just end up in the pockets of administrators.

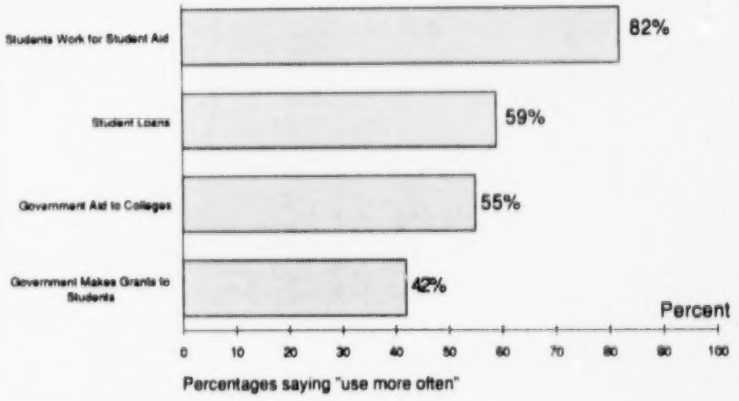
Finally, Californians have mixed feelings about the idea of giving money directly to students. This approach does get some support; 42 percent say it should be used more often, as opposed to 29 percent who want to use it less often. The weaker support for this method may be due to the perception that direct grants are a giveaway, and they thus violate the principle of reciprocity.

Mixed feelings about loans and grants also emerge when people are asked to make choices among different approaches. For example, respondents were asked to choose between giving more loans and grants to qualified students (even if it meant cutbacks in other services and programs), versus asking students themselves to pay for college by making sacrifices such as living at home, working and going to school part-time (even if it meant some students would drop out). Grants and loans were favored by 50 percent of Californians, but a substantial minority (40 percent), would rather see students themselves make sacrifices such as working, living with their parents, or going to school part-time.

Respondents were also asked to choose between giving money directly to colleges versus giving it to students to spend on the public or private college of their choice. Here, Californians are almost evenly divided. A plurality (47 percent to 42 percent) favor giving money directly to colleges rather than giving it to students to spend on the public or private school of their choice.

What Californians are struggling for, in other words, are ways to help students pay for their own educations. People do not want to see students locked out of higher education, but they resist giving support to students with no strings attached.

**Chart 15**
**Preferred Ways for Students to Pay for College**




*"I am going to read you several ways for government to make a college education affordable for academically qualified students. For each one, please tell me if you think government should use this more often than it does now, less often than it does now, or use it about as often as it does it now." [Items in this battery were rotated with each new respondent.]*

*Q: "Government grants money directly to students."*

*Q: "Government makes money available for student loans."*

*Q: "Government provides students with opportunities to work for the financial aid they get."*

*Q: "Government gives money to the public colleges and universities so they can keep the prices they charge students down."*

**APPENDIX ONE**

# National Attitudes Toward Higher Education

This study included a survey of 502 people nationwide, using a shorter survey instrument which included only a subset of the California questions. The study also included a review of existing public opinion survey data on higher education.

Our main reason for collecting this data was to put the California findings in perspective (see page 9: A National Comparison.) But the national findings tell an important and interesting story in their own right. Most of the concerns expressed by Californians are expressed by other Americans as well. The concerns differ in degree, rather than in kind.

Nationally, there is nearly universal agreement that a college education is an important gateway to a good job. Nearly eight out of ten Americans (79 percent) are convinced that high school graduates should go to college "because in the long run they will have better job prospects." An even larger percent (89 percent) feel that society should not allow lack of money to prevent a qualified and motivated student from getting a college education.

As in California, this support for the importance of a college *degree*, however, does not mean that people are sold on the intrinsic value and importance of a college *education*. Seventy-seven percent of Americans think it is a problem that many young people are "wasting their time and money in college because they don't know what to do with their lives," and 54 percent think that it is a problem that "too many people are going to college instead of alternatives to college where they can learn trades like plumbing or computer repair." The same dilemma troubling Californians seems to exist nationwide: A college degree may just be a piece of paper, but without that piece of paper, a young person will find his or her financial prospects very limited.

Both this study and other national studies show considerable concern about the escalating cost of higher education. A 1991 ABC News/*Washington Post* survey found that 65 percent of Americans say that they worry a great deal about the perception that a "good college education is becoming too expensive." This study found that 60 percent of Americans believe that currently, many qualified students do not have the opportunity to go to college.

There is also a strong sense that opportunity to attend college is decreasing and that the situation will continue to worsen. Fifty-five percent say that it is more difficult to get a college education than it was ten years ago, and an even greater number (66 percent) think that it will be even more difficult ten years from now.

Clearly, Americans are starting to worry about this problem and want something to be done about it. Forty-one percent report a high level of concern about higher education in their state (even compared with other issues such as the economy and health care), and an even higher percentage (54 percent) think that higher education in their state needs a fundamental overhaul.

The quality of higher education is obvi-

ously not the preeminent concern. A majority (54 percent) say that public higher education institutions in their state are "teaching students the important things they need to know." What seems to be driving the concerns for a basic overhaul is a sense that an increasingly important good (higher education) is becoming less and less accessible.

When it comes to solutions, national attitudes are virtually identical to those in California. Specifically, the public's thinking seems to be driven by three main values: opportunity, motivation, and reciprocity. Eighty-nine percent think that qualified and motivated students should not be denied an opportunity to attend a college or university merely because of the cost. A large majority (71 percent) also believe that the benefit of attending college depends much more on individual effort (motivation) than on the quality of the college. Finally, 76 percent believe that students don't really appreciate the value of a college education unless they are involved in paying for it themselves (reciprocity).

National public attitudes toward changes in college education are also guided by the same primary values: opportunity, motivation, and reciprocity. Respondents in the national sample were asked to consider three different scenarios that state colleges and universities might use to compensate for cutbacks in state funding. Resistance was highest to ideas which reduced access to higher education: 53 percent thought that raising college prices was a poor idea and 51 percent said that admitting fewer students was a poor idea. By contrast, the public is much more open to the idea of increasing the number of students that professors teach. Only 32 percent rated this as a poor idea.

The primary values of opportunity, reciprocity, and motivation also guide the public's thinking about the best means to help students pay for their college education. The most appealing approach is providing students with opportunities to work for financial aid to pay for their own education. Eighty percent think that we should use this approach more often. Surveys taken during the 1992 presidential election showed extremely high support for candidate Clinton's ideas for using national service as a way to pay for college education. A 1992 CBS News/*New York Times* survey found that 82 percent support the idea that government should provide "loans to college students that they could pay back either by deductions from paychecks or by two years of national service."

Student loans are popular even when they are not linked to national service since they provide opportunity while requiring students to pay for their own education. Sixty-two percent think student loans should be used more often as a way to support college education. At the same time, there are deep concerns about loans. Ninety-one percent of Americans are concerned that too many students take out college loans and never pay them back and 81 percent think that it is a problem that students borrow two much money.

The idea of giving money directly to colleges has somewhat less support. Fifty-two percent think this method should be used more frequently. Giving money directly to students is the least popular idea. Forty-three percent think this idea should be used more often; 31 percent say that it should be used less often and 22 percent say it should be used the same amount. Obviously, Americans support the idea of helping students go to college, but direct grants contradict the value of reciprocity.

## APPENDIX TWO

# Research Methodology

To study attitudes toward higher education, the Public Agenda Foundation conducted eight focus groups in California, a random sample telephone survey of California residents, and a random sample telephone survey of residents of the continental United States.

Eight focus groups were conducted in California in the spring of 1993. Groups were held in Bakersfield, Hayward, Los Angeles, San Diego, and San Jose. These group sessions included in-depth questioning of cross sections of Californians. Participants for the focus groups were recruited by independent consumer research organizations in California. This qualitative research stage generated hypotheses later tested with the two telephone surveys.

Public Agenda developed the instruments (questionnaires) for the surveys and contracted Research International, Inc. to conduct sampling, interviewing and tabulation. The California survey was conducted with 832 California residents 18 years of age or older. The sampling error for the California survey is plus or minus three percent. The national survey was conducted with 502 residents of the continental United States 18 years of age or older and has a sampling error of plus or minus four percent. Samples for both the California and national surveys were drawn and interviewed using random digit dialing techniques, where every household—including those with unlisted numbers—in California and the continental United States had an equal probability of being dialed. In the California survey, respondents were given the option of being interviewed in English or Spanish (49 interviews were conducted in Spanish). The surveys were conducted at Research International's computer-assisted telephone interviewing facility in New York, between the first and ninth of August 1993.

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Founded a decade ago by public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, the Public Agenda Foundation works to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues and to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view. Public Agenda's in-depth research on how average citizens think about policy forms the basis for its extensive citizen education work. Its citizen education materials—used by the National Issues Forums and media outlets across the country—have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision-makers across the political spectrum.

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